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ABSTRACT

A study tested the validity and reliability of a structured interpersonal communication encounter method of assessing interpersonal communication proficiency. Subjects, 13 graduate students in Communicative Disorders, were assessed 2 times within 3 weeks by interacting with 2 different test initiators. Two tests of validity and two tests of reliability were made. Results indicated that both validity and reliability coefficients were limited by the fact that the subjects were above average as interpersonal communicators. It is concluded that findings might have been more pronounced with a larger, or more heterogenous sample. (An interpersonal skills rating form is attached.) (RS)

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THE VALIDITY AND RELIABILITY OF A PERFORMANCE TEST OF INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION PROFICIENCY

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INTRODUCTION

The importance of interpersonal communication to the achievement of almost any social or career goal is well recognized. Thus, it is not surprising that interpersonal communication instruction occupies a prominent place in curricula in higher education. It is sometimes found in communication curricula as a discrete course; other times it appears as a unit in a hybrid course in basic communication. It also appears by a variety of names in curricula in other academic departments. As the popularity of interpersonal communication has risen, especially in the past twenty years, many interpersonal textbooks have appeared on the scene. These books present an abundance of information on interpersonal theory and exercises designed to enhance interpersonal performance. While the content or theory dimension of interpersonal communication instruction can be assessed by traditional pencil and paper testing techniques, the means of assessment appropriate for interpersonal communication performance is not as clear.

Some instructors rely on indirect means of assessing interpersonal communication proficiency. One of these means is by paper and pencil testing of knowledge in the assumption that a student who demonstrates knowledge of interpersonal concepts will consequently perform as a proficient interpersonal communicator. Another indirect measure that is sometimes employed takes the form of a self-report device, the assumption being that students who report themselves as proficient communicators do indeed

communicate proficiently.

But there are those of us who believe that if a purpose of instruction is to develop proficiency as an interpersonal communicator, then as responsible instructors, we are compelled to assess students as actual performing interpersonal communicators. While there are few who would argue against this logic, there is little evidence that standardized direct assessment of interpersonal proficiency is practiced widely in our basic courses. There are reports of research in this area, by persons such as Spitzberg and Hurt (1987), but there is little reason to believe that research has been translated into practice to any great extent.

Minimal use of performance testing in interpersonal communication undoubtedly is because of an inability to arrive at a consensus as professionals on how it should be done. Recognizing that a consensus may never occur, and recognizing that interpersonal performance assessment should be an integral part of our basic course, the basic course instructors at the University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh have developed a standardized interpersonal communication performance test for use with students in our basic course.

WHAT IS INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION?

There will never be agreement on the question of what behaviors constitute interpersonal communication proficiency. But we identified some common threads found in the literature from which we constructed a rating sheet to use in the

assessment.

One behavior that appears consistently is empathy - showing sensitivity to others. Bochner and Kelly (1974), who constructed an early conceptual framework for studying interpersonal communication, list empathy as an essential ingredient.

Another factor that comes through repeatedly is appropriate self-disclosure - permitting another person to know what one is feeling, thinking, or wishing. It is impossible to create any kind of interpersonal relationship without the parties involved sharing at least something of their inner selves. Among the researchers who identify self-disclosure are Berryman-Fink and Pederson (1981).

A third factor of interpersonal communication that runs throughout the literature is promoting interaction. This factor includes two types of behaviors: what Wiemann (1977) refers to as interaction-management and what Cegala and others (1982) call interaction involvement, or the extent to which individuals participate with others in conversation. So the idea behind this factor is that part of interpersonal effectiveness is obtaining the involvement of self and other.

The three behaviors identified so far (empathy, self-disclosure, and promoting interaction) are more unique to the interpersonal setting than other communication settings. To these, we added four oral communication behaviors that are more generic in that they cut across various settings: physical involvement, vocal usage, language usage, and listening. Thus,

we developed a rating scale composed of seven behaviors that serves as the instrument by which we measure interpersonal proficiency. (See Appendix A).

THE ASSESSMENT PROCEDURE

Our next step was to develop a structured interpersonal encounter in which the student interacts with a test initiator for approximately five minutes. The more generic behaviors are assessed during the encounter regardless of the topics discussed. But to assess the behaviors more specific to interpersonal communication, certain prompts are included in the encounter designed to give students the opportunity to demonstrate the behaviors.

To allow the student to demonstrate empathy, for example, the initiator introduces a point of view that is thought to be different from that of the student. While it is expected that students should be able to assert their own points of view, empathic interpersonal communicators should show an understanding of where the other person is coming from. To assess self-disclosure, the student is given an opportunity to reveal information about a subject of central concern to themselves. This could involve talking about career plans, or a topic of current controversy. The expectation is that students can share information about themselves, but stop short of going into their innermost feelings or dominating the conversation. The ability to promote interaction can be done by asking the student to introduce a subject that should be appropriate for the two people

to discuss. Some of the responses to prompts may allow a rater to assess more than one behavior. For example, if a student promotes interaction by introducing a subject which is not only appropriate, but relates to something the initiator said earlier, this shows good listening skills, or depending upon the nature of the subject, even empathy skills.

PURPOSES OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study was to test the validity and reliability of the structured interpersonal communication encounter method of assessing interpersonal communication proficiency. Two tests of validity and two tests of reliability were made.

VALIDITY. Validity is the extent to which an instrument measures what it purports to measure. Two common types of validity found in measurement literature are content and criteria-related validity. Content validity is "...The process of determining the extent to which a set of tasks provides a relevant and representative sample of the domain of tasks under consideration." (Gronlund 1985). This is the approach used in the development of the rating scale used in this study.

Criterion-related validity is "...The process of determining the extent to which test performance is related to some other valued measure of performance." (Gronlund 1985). Two measures of criterion-related validity were made. One measure involved comparing the interpersonal communication ratings of the subjects by their supervisors and the subjects' performance on the test.

The other measure involved comparing the interpersonal communication ratings of the subjects by their peers and the subjects' performance on the test.

RELIABILITY. Reliability is the consistency of measurement. It is determined by obtaining two sets of measures under conditions that are as close to identical as possible and then compare the results. The correlation coefficient is used to determine reliability. One method of reliability was the test-retest method. Each subject engaged in two interpersonal communication encounters with two different initiators. A reliability coefficient was determined to show the consistency between the two performances.

Another aspect of reliability which is unique to a test in which individual raters make judgments on performance is the extent of agreement between, or among, raters. Unlike a pencil and paper test, which can stand alone with its reliability, the test of interpersonal communication proficiency is only as reliable as the persons making the judgments. So in this study, the second test of reliability took the form of agreement between two trained raters.

The four research questions were as follows:

1. What is the criterion-related validity of a test of interpersonal proficiency as seen by the validity coefficient comparing the interpersonal communication ratings of the subjects by their supervisors and the subjects' performances on the test?

2. What is the criterion-related validity of a test of interpersonal proficiency as seen by the validity coefficient comparing the interpersonal communication ratings of the subjects by their peers and the subjects' performance on the test?
3. What is the reliability of a test of interpersonal communication proficiency as seen by the reliability coefficient comparing the subjects' two performances?
4. What is the reliability of a test of interpersonal communication proficiency as seen by the reliability coefficient comparing the ratings of two trained raters of the subjects' performance on each of the times they take the test?

METHOD

The subjects were thirteen graduate students in Communicative Disorders. Besides their availability these students were selected because of two other reasons related to the criterion-related validity questions: they knew each other well enough from being together in low enrollment classes and from working together in the Speech and Hearing Clinic, that they were able to rate each other's interpersonal communication proficiency; two of their instructors/clinical supervisors knew them well enough to rate them as interpersonal communicators.

The subjects were assessed two times within three weeks by interacting with two different test initiators. The encounters were videotaped. One initiator was a middle-aged male Professor

of Communication. The other one was a female, a senior majoring in Speech Communication Education. The investigator prepared the initiators by reviewing videotapes of previous student assessments and by cooperatively constructing a series of prompts that were appropriate for these initiators interacting with the subjects and with which they were comfortable. The prompts had to provide opportunity for the subjects to demonstrate proficiency in the seven behaviors identified on the rating sheet.

Two Communication Department faculty members served as raters. They were familiar with the assessment process as a result of participation in training sessions with all basic course instructors. The raters viewed and rated the performances on the rating scales independently with no discussion between the two of them throughout the process.

RESULTS

The first criterion-related validity test involved comparing the ratings of the subjects by their supervisors and the subjects' performance on the test. The correlation coefficients between the mean rating on the two times they took the test and the mean rating of the two faculty supervisors was .25. For this figure to be meaningful, there would have to be high correlation between the two test raters with themselves and the two supervisors with themselves. Unfortunately, the latter did not materialize. One of the supervisors skewed the ratings toward the high side, claiming that she did not observe a normal

distribution of proficiency levels by the subjects. Thus, the correlation between the test raters and this supervisor was only .02 and her correlation with the other supervisor was only .27. However, the correlation between the two test raters and the supervisor who rated with a normal distribution was .50. So considerable criterion-related validity was shown only when comparing test performances with the ratings of one supervisor.

The second criterion-related validity test involved comparing the mean ratings of the two times they took the test with the mean peer ratings. First, the rating reliability of peers evaluating peers was high, translating into .82 for any two peers rating all other peers. The validity coefficient between the mean of the two test performances and the peer evaluation was .44.

The first reliability test involved comparing the subjects on their two performances. Test reliability was shown here. The reliability coefficient between the first and second performance as rated by the same two raters was .58.

The second reliability test involved comparing the ratings of the two trained raters on each of the two times the test was administered. The reliability coefficient for the first time was .91. The second time, it was .71.

CONCLUSIONS

This study has described the structured interpersonal communication encounter as a means of assessing interpersonal communication proficiency. The encounter can be completed in

about five minutes. Because it is an individually administered test, its efficiency cannot be compared to a test that can be administered to a large number of students at the same time. The time commitment for assessing by the structured encounter is the same as assessing public speaking proficiency by a five-minute speech. An additional human resource is needed for the encounter in the form of a trained initiator.

Both validity and reliability coefficients were limited by the fact that the thirteen subjects used in the study were above average as interpersonal communicators. Findings might have been more pronounced with a larger, or more heterogenous sample. Even with this limitation, some significant validity and reliability coefficients were obtained in support of the test.

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APPENDIX A

INTERPERSONAL SKILLS RATING FORM

Speaker Name _____ Rater Name _____ Score ___

Circle the single best response for each factor.

1. Physical Involvement - Uses eye contact, facial expression, appropriate posture, gesture, and poise.

1	2	3	4	5
Seriously Deficient	Deficient	Minimally Proficient	Clearly Proficient	Highly Proficient

2. Vocal Usage - Expressive, varied; fluent, avoids excessive vocalized pauses/fillers; appropriate volume, rate; clear articulation; correct pronunciation; suitable vocal quality.

1	2	3	4	5

3. Promoting Interaction - Initiates, sustains interaction; gives appropriate responses; shares conversation involvement.

1	2	3	4	5

4. Language Usage - Appropriate (avoids excessive use of slang, profanity) clear, correct.

1	2	3	4	5

5. Listening - Listens carefully; gives appropriate feedback (picks up topic after interruption and able to summarize main topics).

1	2	3	4	5

6. Empathy - Responses show sensitivity to the ideas and feelings of others.

1	2	3	4	5

7. Self Disclosure - Gives appropriate amount and type of information about self.

1	2	3	4	5